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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ADDIS ABABA 000215

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SUBJECT: PM'S ADVISOR BEREKET DISCUSSES ELECTIONS AND VOA  
WITH PDAS

REF: ADDIS 4

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) In a broad-ranging discussion with visiting Africa Bureau PDAS Linda Thomas-Greenfield on January 17, Special Advisor to the Prime Minister, Bereket Simon, offered his version of history and less than wholly accurate assurances to comfort the USG that the Government and ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party are taking all possible steps to establish a level playing field and to conduct Ethiopia's coming local elections in a free and fair manner. Despite sensitive reports to Post otherwise, Bereket argued that considerations for parole for two still detained civil society leaders remains solely a judicial decision. Confronted by the PDAS's extremely direct inquiry into Ethiopian Government (GoE) plans to stop jamming the Voice of America (VOA) radio signal, Bereket vacillated between denying that the GoE is jamming that signal and arguing that the GoE must take any steps it deems appropriate to counter VOA's attacks "aimed at destabilizing Ethiopia." End summary.

ELECTIONS PLANNING GOING SWIMMINGLY...  
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12. (SBU) Africa Bureau PDAS Linda Thomas-Greenfield opened her January 17 meeting with Bereket Simon, EPRDF Central Committee member and senior advisor to the Prime Minister, by inquiring about preparations for the local elections scheduled for April 13 and 20, 2008. Bereket replied confidently by highlighting the new electoral law passed in June, consultations with the opposition, and preparations by the new National Electoral Board (NEB) installed in July. In an effort to highlight the ruling party's magnanimity, Bereket argued that the electoral law was prepared through a process of broad discussions with all parties in Parliament and that all "except a few" of the opposition's proposals for that law were accepted. Bereket went on to applaud the new NEB arguing that for the first time in history, NEB candidates were nominated, screened, and selected in concert with the opposition. Bereket commended the EPRDF's participation in an inter-party dialogue process with the opposition throughout late 2006

and into 2007, and defended the EPRDF's refusal to resume such dialogue, after several opposition groups walked out, until those parties formally apologize. When asked about the issues of contention in the dialogue process, Bereket claimed that the opposition walked out because it wanted permanent NEB offices at the local level and wanted foreign and domestic election observers to have equal rights. The EPRDF, he argued, preferred part-time local NEB offices due to the cost of maintaining such a presence and favored granting local election observers the "right" to observe while requiring foreign observers to seek permission to do so.

13. (SBU) Diverging notably from guidance that Post has received from the NEB itself as well as from the provisions in the electoral law, Bereket informed PDAS Thomas-Greenfield that under the current law, domestic election observers have only to "show-up" to be able to observe elections, whereas foreigners must apply to observe elections. Bereket argued that, in principle, the EPRDF sees no difference between domestic and foreign observers, but confided that due to the bad experience Ethiopia had in 2005 with foreign election observers, the GoE retains the right to permit/prevent foreigners from observing elections. Bereket took under advisement the PDAS's hope that the GoE would not bar any particular category of election observers and explained that the EPRDF understands that its task is to "put its own house in order democratically."

14. (SBU) Bereket noted that nearly 14 million voters have already registered since late-December, and that the GoE expects final voter registration to be around 20 million

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people, or 90% of eligible voters. The only challenge, he noted, was that the current harvest period may impede rural voters from registering. The NEB is now working with the Ministry of Information to establish arrangements for the allocation of airtime among political parties as stipulated in the electoral law. In preparation for the campaign season, the EPRDF has produced a Code of Conduct manual to train its members with an objective of creating a conducive atmosphere for the elections.

...EXCEPT FOR OPPOSITION EFFORTS TO UNDERMINE THEM

15. (SBU) When pressed by the PDAS on whether he or the party would make a public declaration calling for the cooperation of all EPRDF cadres -- as he had done to strong positive effect in the run-up to the 2005 national elections -- Bereket stated that he would do so. Bereket quickly moved to highlight the "illegal" activities of some opposition parties aimed at undermining the electoral process. When pressed to provide examples, Bereket noted that some opposition groups are 1) telling the people not to register to vote, 2) belittling the local government institutions, and 3) encouraging voters not to turn out for the elections as a means to express their rejection of the system. When the PDAS inquired whether such actions were illegal, Bereket conceded that they are not but, rather, that they are "not healthy politically." Scampering for an example, Bereket finally argued that the opposition was destroying signposts directing the public to voting stations where they could register.

JUDICIAL INTEGRITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY DETAINEES

16. (SBU) Shifting to a new subject, PDAS asked about the continued detention of Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie, the two civil society detainees convicted in late-December who have yet to be released on parole in contrast to standard Ethiopian judicial practice (see reftel). Despite credible reports to Post that the EPRDF Central Committee

is driving the treatment of these political detainees, Bereket punted by arguing that a judicial review of their eligibility for parole remains on-going, but that they would definitely be released before the local elections, "if a judicial decision is made." Despite the PDAS's friendly recommendation that the two be released prior to the elections, Bereket simply argued that the GoE would address this legal matter in a legal way.

VOA IN LINE WITH TERRORISTS, BUT WE'RE NOT JAMMING THE SIGNAL  
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17. (SBU) PDAS Thomas-Greenfield pointedly asked Bereket (himself a former Information Minister and still a major decision-maker on media and GoE information issues) if there was any movement by the GoE to cease jamming VoA's signal. (Note: The Federal Communications Commission has positively confirmed that VoA's signal is being jammed from within Ethiopia. Post notes that the incidence of jamming increases in line with GoE protests about VoA content. Further, the GoE publicly announced in early January that it had begun using a similar method to jam the Eritrean TV signal in the region.) Bereket replied defensively that the GoE is not jamming VoA, but argued that Ethiopia has been on the receiving end of VoA's efforts to undermine the GoE for years. Bereket went on to argue that "VoA is working with the Eritrean Government, opposition groups, and terrorists" to undermine Ethiopia and the USG has never responded to the GoE's appeals for redress. Rejecting the notion that VoA is an independent entity, Bereket argued that VoA is not good for the strategic bilateral relationship and that if the USG runs VoA, it can make them balance their content. PDAS Thomas-Greenfield reaffirmed VoA's independence noting that the USG can only convey perceptions of problems to VoA, not force a change in action. "If VoA is truly independent," Bereket argued, "let the GoE deal with VoA directly about our concerns without the State Department intervening."

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18. (SBU) Reaffirming his talking point, Bereket argued that the GoE does not think that jamming is the right solution and stressed that the GoE does not have a problem with freedom of expression. Undermining that talking point in the very next breath, however, Bereket emphasized that the GoE "would not sit idle if VoA is fighting tooth and nail to destroy us." Bereket asked rhetorically why the GoE is being criticized if it is VoA that is the "attack dog." Defensively, Bereket argued that the GoE has not attacked any USG interests, but VoA doesn't know its limits. If there is no resolution, he concluded, the GoE itself "must do what is necessary in the sake of peace and security." The Ambassador noted the appointment of a new VoA Horn of Africa Service Chief and Post's recommendations that he come to Ethiopia for consultations and dialogue with the GoE very early in his tenure. Bereket dismissed the suggestion saying that the GoE has no chance of being heard and that he was unsure whether such discussions would bear fruit.

COMMENT  
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19. (C) Ever the embodiment of the EPRDF's hard-core members, Bereket's confirmation of an ever-accommodating ruling party on the domestic political scene and his dogmatic responses to inquiries on VoA were consistent with the GoE's stated positions not to accommodate the VOA and pursue opportunities to undercut the opposition. Despite his assurances that the GoE views domestic and foreign election monitors as equal, in principle, but foreign observers will need to apply for access. The NEB Chairman has confirmed to Post that foreign observers will not be permitted for the coming local elections and the electoral law is even stricter noting

that foreign observers may only participate if the GoE invites them "as deemed necessary." Similarly, domestic observers may not just "show up," but must petition the NEB to observe, must meet the as-yet-unspecified procedural and competency requirements, and receive a license from the NEB, of which none has yet been issued. Foreigners can provide capacity training of Ethiopian observers, but it must be under the guidance and oversight of the NEB. While the ruling and opposition parties did engage in dialogue about the composition of the NEB and the content of the draft electoral law, Bereket neglected points, such as the fact that the ruling party rejected the majority of opposition-nominated NEB candidates and the ruling party's refusal to negotiate on specific opposition recommendations for the electoral law which was what prompted their walk-out.

¶10. (C) While Bereket's responses were not surprising, they do offer a glimpse of the hard-line stance by the GoE and EPRDF to undercut the opposition by legal-though-questionable means, and giving the appearance of advocating for a transparent and open democratic process. P/DAS was effective in getting the message to the EPRDF Central Committee that the international community is focused on the elections and expects the GoE to make efforts to ensure a credible process. Only by re-echoing this message with interlocutors at every level of the GoE/EPRDF at every opportunity as the elections approach will we be able to spark actions by the EPRDF which more closely reflect its rhetoric.

¶11. (SBU) Finally, the U.S. Embassy is working diligently behind the scenes to energize the EU diplomats to support U.S. led efforts to support the opposition's right to participate in the local election. Currently, the largest group, the former CUD members, have been effectively barred from participating when their political party, the CUDP, was handed over to an anti-CUD pro-government advocate. The general public is not happy with the turn of events and the fear of boycott by the opposition or low voter turnout threatens to make these local elections meaningless. Additionally, the U.S. has been working with the Ethiopian elders to find a solution to the detention of two British NGO workers, Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie. The U.S.

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will coordinate and continue to lead efforts on greater openness and transparency in the political process, a very tough road. End Comment.

¶12. (U) PDAS Thomas-Greenfield was unable to clear this cable before departing Addis Ababa.  
YAMAMOTO